



Umoja

Unity in the Community

Christian Education
for African-American
Faith Communities

“... for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.”

1 John 4:20-21

LIVING
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Umoja:

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Christian Education for
African-American Faith Communities

A 5-Session study by
The Rev. Roland Stringfellow, MDiv, MA

Contributors
The Rev. Jay Emerson Johnson, PhD
The Rev. Elizabeth Leung, PhD

How good and pleasant it is when God's people
live together in unity!—Psalm 133:1

Access to the film Unity in the Community - <https://vimeo.com/57488656>
password is umojaunity (no upper case and no space).

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INTRODUCTION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Trusting in the Living God

Christians believe in the “Living God”. This implies that God is alive and active in the hearts and minds of followers of Jesus Christ, who communicates the message of truth that leads to peace and reconciliation with their Creator. Similarly, Christians believe in the Living Word, the Bible, which communicates a unique and transformative message to the reader. This is why two people can read the same passage of scripture, yet come away with two different perspectives because God speaks to the individual. This also happens when the Living Word is preached, the people come away with a different perspective than that of their neighbor because God has spoken directly to their situation and they are the better for it.

It is an insult to say that “God is dead” or that the Bible is “the last Will and Testament of God”. God is alive and scriptures become alive once readers interact with the words and receive God’s instruction expressly meant for them. It is a tragedy when pastors and good church going folk live as if God does not speak uniquely to the individual or that God has spoken a message in scripture that is “once and for all time” and has nothing new to say—like a last will and testament. This happens every time when a pastor or a parent says to a gay son, a lesbian daughter or to their child who is transitioning between the genders, “God didn’t speak to you to do that!” or “The Bible says how all men and women should behave and how you are living is not right!” After hearing such harsh words from the ones who are to love and care for them, the result can be hurt feelings, broken relationships and possibly even death—emotional, spiritual, and/or physical.

The authority given to a pastor and family members by those who are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender can be huge. When the church and the family reject, it can often feel as if God is rejecting. If the lesbian daughter doesn’t read

God’s word on her own, she will miss the truth that, “*No, God has not rejected and disowned His people [whose destiny] He had marked out and appointed and foreknown from the beginning*” (Romans 11:2a AMP). This daughter has a choice, to either listen to her church and family that tells her God is not speaking to her or listen to the message of her God that speaks peace and courage to her heart through the scriptures. This is a huge challenge for many—do they choose the acceptance of their church and family and reject the truth of the Living God spoken to them or do they reject the message of condemnation and choose the life and freedom God offers?

This question is the heart of what *Umoja: Unity in the Community* is all about. Umoja uses this in-depth curriculum and film resources to cover the topics of theology and scripture interpretation, church and family dynamics, human rights vs. gay rights and same gender marriage. For any church or individual to be ready to tackle these topics it takes courage and the desire to see that no one is excluded from the life of the family. In order for this study to be ready in its final form, there were several congregations that were willing to be test audiences for the Umoja program.

I want to dedicate this study to these three courageous congregations who tested this 5-week study and shared their feedback so this curriculum can be solid in its theology and transformative in its application—

- ▼ **Sojourner Truth Presbyterian Church, Richmond, CA,**
Rev. Kamal Hassan, Pastor and Coordinator
- ▼ **Imani Baptist Church, Oakland, CA,**
Rev. Dr. George Cummings and Minister Robert Newells, Coordinator
- ▼ **Liberation United Church of Christ, Seattle, WA,**
Rev. Darrell Goodwin-Moultry, Pastor and Coordinator



ABOUT: LIVING OUTFRONT The CLGS Curriculum Project

The Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and Ministry (CLGS) was established at the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, CA in the year 2000. The CLGS Curriculum Project provides congregation-based education and training for Christian faith communities. These programs encourage a deeper appreciation of how social and economic justice ministries reside at the heart of Christian faith and practice. God's grace, offered through Jesus Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit, is manifested in the commitment to God's abundant life for all people, and indeed, for the whole creation (Romans 8:18-23).

That vision of abundant life provides the framework for these curricular programs. In a world of deep divisions, broken relationships, and fractured communities, CLGS invites Christian congregations to shape their ministries with that divine promise of abundance for all—regardless of race, ethnicity, class, ability, gender, or sexuality. All of those social “issues” (and many more) are inextricably woven together into a “seamless garment” of witness and mission for Christian faith communities.

In that fabric of abundant life, the LIVING OUTFRONT curriculum project focuses particularly on biblical, spiritual, and theological engagements with human sexuality and gender, and especially for the full thriving and flourishing of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people, both in faith communities and in the wider society.

Rather than a single curriculum for all congregations, CLGS is committed to addressing the rich cultural diversity of Christian faith communities in the U.S. by tailoring the component programs of this project to the particular needs of the communities CLGS seeks to serve. The Living OutFront curriculums offer a suite of programs for African-American, Asian-American, Caucasian and Latino/a congregations and communities. All of these particular programs nevertheless share a common framework for Christian education, rooted in the classic touch-

stones of sin, repentance, and salvation (see the “Life Abundant” statement included in this guide).

CLGS is committed to expanding and improving these curricular programs “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ” (Ephesians 4:12). Feedback from participating congregations is vitally important in that shared work of ministry. CLGS can be contacted through the Center's website (www.clgs.org) or by sending an email with the subject line of “Umoja Curriculum” to: clgs@clgs.org.



LIFE ABUNDANT A Theological and Spiritual Framework for the Living OutFront Curriculum Project

Introduction

In the Gospel according to John, Jesus declares that he has come that all may have life and have it abundantly (10:10). Both the gospel writer and Jesus likely had images in mind of Eden, the paradise in which the Creator God had placed the first humans where they could enjoy the Creator's goodness. In that garden, God declared that the creation was unreservedly good (Gen. 1:31).

All people, without exception, are created to enjoy the goodness of God's creation. No one is excluded from the divine promise of abundant life—not for reasons of race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, or gender.

Yet this vision of abundance has not yet become a reality for everyone. Indeed, all people fall short of that glorious abundance that God intends for God's creation (Romans 3:23). Human communities and the planet itself are broken by what Christian traditions refer to as sin. Turning away from anything that blocks the full flourishing of life and turning toward the abundance of God's blessing describes a lifelong posture Christians have called repentance. All of

this is animated by the Gospel hope of embracing the abundant life that Jesus came to offer, which takes many diverse and wonderful forms; this is what Christians mean by salvation.

The LIVING OUTFRONT curriculum project is rooted in this fundamental Christian framework marked by sin, repentance, and salvation. This traditional framework resonates deeply with the biblical witness and with many centuries of Christian history.

The Bible has, of course, been read and interpreted in diverse ways. At times, the Bible has been used to exclude particular groups of people—whether because of their race, ethnicity, sexuality, or gender—from God’s promise of abundant life. LIVING OUTFRONT curricular programs offer a way for Christian faith communities to respect the unique role of the Bible in Christianity, including the spiritual authority of Scripture, while also embracing its liberating message for all people. The Bible is both inspired and inspiring, as it equips people for “every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16)

Retrieving and reclaiming the classic arc of Christian faith from sin through repentance and toward salvation provides a solid theological and spiritual framework for these curricular programs. More specifically, this framework can revitalize and strengthen the social justice ministries offered with and for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people.

Irenaeus, a second century Christian theologian, once observed that “the glory of God is the human person fully alive.” LIVING OUTFRONT programs are designed to inspire and to urge Christian faith communities to put that vision of abundant life “out front” of all else.

1. The Reality of Sin

Biblical writers used a wide range of images to describe sin. Yet most of those writers shared this in common: sin is manifested in broken relationship. What Christians have called “The Ten Commandments,” for example, are not arbi-

trary rules but ways of being in relationship with God, with each other, and the wider world around us (Exodus 20:1-17).

The effects of sin are clearly evident today: deeply fractured communities divided by race and ethnicity; families ruptured by domestic violence and sexual abuse; nations torn apart by dictatorial regimes and genocidal wars; the most vulnerable among us left without resources in a dissolving social safety net; and ecological degradation that puts the future of life on this planet at risk.

Humans have travelled a long way from Eden, where, according to the biblical writer in Genesis, Adam and Eve flourished as they lived in harmony with each other, with their environment, and with their Creator. In stark contrast to the image of paradise, we live in an imperfect and, in many ways, a broken world. Wherever and whenever the dignity of any human being is denied or anyone’s potential for abundant life is curtailed—whether because of race, class, ability, sexuality, or gender—sin is present and active.

Biblical writers would agree with that view of sin as they wrote about it mostly with reference to economic injustice and social oppression (see Jeremiah 22:3 and Ezekiel 22:7, 29 as just a few among many examples). But they also wrote about individual sin, too. Jesus said that the greatest commandments are these: to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves (Mt. 22:33-40). These “great” commandments offer a vision of love as the source of abundant life, which includes loving ourselves just as God loves and delights in us.

As many LGBT people have discovered, however, loving ourselves can be challenging when we are taught from an early age to be ashamed of who we are and who God has created us to be. That sense of shame can lead to self-loathing and isolation; it can also lead to sexually abusive and violent relationships.

Whatever prevents us from loving ourselves will likewise keep us from loving others, loving the planet, and loving God with our whole heart, mind, and strength. Recognizing those moments of “love prevented” urges all of us to the practice of repentance.

2. The Call to Repentance

What do Christians mean by that “repentance that leads to life” (Acts 11:18)? If sin describes a broken relationship, what would repentance mean in a world marked by fractured and divided relationships with ourselves, with each other, and with God’s creation?

In the Hebrew Bible, sin is most commonly described with the word *het*, which means “going astray,” especially straying from the path that leads to life. In Deuteronomy, Moses urges the Israelites to choose that life-giving path (30:19-20). Similarly, repentance is described with the term *teshuvah*, which means “return,” or coming back to the path of life.

New Testament writers use the Greek word *hamartia* when they refer to sin, which means “missing the mark,” or falling short of a target. The word we translate as “repentance” is the Greek term *metanoia*, which refers to “perceiving differently,” or changing one’s mind. When Paul preached among the Greeks in Athens, he urged them to “repentance,” to change their minds about the inanimate objects they were worshipping in their temples, and to embrace the living God, the one in whom everyone lives, and moves, and has being (Acts 17:28).

In both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, repentance thus marks a turn and a return, a directional change in relationship—with self, with others, and therefore with God—that enriches and deepens our life together. Rather than an isolated or single moment in time, repentance shapes a life-long practice of directing ourselves and our relationships toward that abundant life God intends for all.

The abundance of God’s life includes the goodness of human sexuality and the joy it offers in our families and intimate relationships. That divine goodness includes heterosexual couples, same-gender loving people, people who choose celibacy, multi-generational households, and those who embrace transgendered forms of living and relationship, to name just a few.

God’s good gift, however, is too often distorted in a world marred by sex trafficking, the commodification of human bodies, racial and ethnic stereotyping, domestic violence, economic oppression, and sexual addictions. Whenever and wherever the fullness of life is denied or rejected, in ourselves or to others, the Gospel calls us to repent and to hope for salvation.

3. The Hope of Salvation

Everyone longs to live life to the fullest and to be free of the burdens that hold us back from abundant life. In the midst of life’s difficulties, everyone seeks the “peace that passes all understanding” (Phil. 4:7). That peace, like a sail lifting a boat over the waves of a storm-tossed sea, offers unimaginable comfort, even in the face of death. That peace assures us that the God who made us also waits for us with open arms to welcome us home. That peace surely marks what Christians call “salvation.”

Gospel writers portrayed salvation in diverse ways. Jesus offered salvation to all, yet also addressed each person’s particular individual needs. At times salvation appears as healing from physical ailment; at others, as the forgiveness of sin. Sometimes it’s both at the same time (Mt. 9:2-7). Luke described the saving work of Jesus by drawing from the Hebrew prophet Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,” Luke’s Jesus says, to “bring good news to the poor... to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free” (Luke 4:18).

While God’s loving faithfulness remains constant, it often takes time for us to see it clearly and to perceive how the saving work of Christ can transform us and our communities. Each person’s family history, cultural background, and social situation will shape our perceptions of salvation a bit differently. For all of us, our understanding of salvation unfolds over time. As the Apostle Paul noted, “For now we see in a mirror, dimly – but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known” (1 Cor. 13:12).

LGBT people are multi-dimensional people just like everyone else. They experience joys and challenges; they have faults, miss the mark, and fall short of the glory God intends for all—just like everyone else. And just like everyone else, God loves and cherishes LGBT people for exactly who they are as they travel, just like everyone else, toward abundant life.

For some, that spiritual journey involves extra burdens placed on them by others. When LGBT people try to deny their same-gender attraction or try to conform to the gendered expectations of their communities, they live with burdens God did not intend. For them, salvation will entail the freedom to embrace fully their God-given lives.

As Christian people, we are called to help others embrace God's abundant life. For some of us, this will mean repenting of the harm we have done to LGBT people. For others, it will mean realizing the harm we have done to ourselves and how deeply we are loved and cherished by God. For everyone, it will mean the reconciliation of broken relationships, which the Apostle Paul described as the ministry of all Christians (2 Cor. 5:18).

That great work of reconciliation, that gift of abundant life, is nothing less than divine salvation in Christ and through the power of the Holy Spirit.



UMOJA: UNITY IN THE COMMUNITY
Christian Education for
African-American Faith Communities

Overview

"**UMOJA**" is a Swahili word that means unity. African-American communities, however, are deeply divided over homosexuality. Many families and congregations are unsure about supporting loved-ones who come out as lesbian, gay,

bisexual, or transgender (**LGBT**), especially if and when church authority teach to the contrary. Many are brokenhearted and confused in the midst of hurtful words and damaged relationships. The resources of this program are designed to help repair, restore and rediscover the kinship of families and churches.

The UMOJA Program is designed to facilitate safe, non-threatening dialogue about the diversity of human sexuality and the tension that sometimes exists within African-American faith communities in relation to LGBT individuals. Film and group discussion will help all participants (regardless of their position on this topic) to explore the spiritual, social and emotional impact rejection has upon same-gender loving and gender variant individuals and couples.

While this particular study can be utilized by an individual, it is written with a teacher or facilitator in mind who would be leading a group. Realizing that each group will have different dynamics and will be at various levels of readiness to address the topic, **Umoja: Unity in the Community** is written to be modified to fit the needs of the group. There is a Facilitator's Guide located at the end of this book that gives the facilitator notes and suggestions on the best way to help participants gain the most from the study.

But What About Leviticus?

This question about what is written in the book of Leviticus about same sex behavior, along with "*What about Sodom and Gomorrah or Romans Chapter 1?*" may be on the minds of those participating in this study. Many Christians focus their attention on the roughly six passages in the Bible that seem to address same-sex behavior. While this five week study will help the reader explore a theology of inclusion for all people to be welcomed into the church, it will not explicitly explore these questionable passages. The reason is not because they are too difficult to address. To the contrary, a great deal of biblical scholarship has been published on these texts over the last sixty years—**many of them are noted in the Facilitator's Guide along with a brief survey article on that scholarship.** In fact, the vast majority of biblical scholars agree

that those passages do not refer to same-sex relationships as we know them today, but rather they are prohibitions that spoke to a specific people during a specific period in history.

The focus of this program is, instead, on the concepts and perceptions that cause relationships to be broken, sometimes beyond repair. In that light, **UMOJA** challenges participants not to place the “**letter of the law**” above the “**love of the law**”. When a person says the reason he or she cannot accept another who is LGBT because the Bible (the law) condemns that behavior, they are ignoring the true intent of the law, which is to love one another and not allow what is written to interfere with maintaining relationships. An example of this from scripture is found in Mark 2: 23-28 when the Pharisees accuse Jesus of not following the law when he and his disciples harvest on the Sabbath because they were hungry. This was a violation of what was written—not to work on the Sabbath day—however Jesus explains that the Sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the Sabbath. In other words, to deny someone of something they need (in this case food) because the law forbids it, is faulty thinking. To deny a LGBT person what they need (love, support and shelter) because the Bible is often translated as forbidding their actions is also faulty thinking. We are to value quality of life for human beings above what is written in the word.

To that end, all of the biblical passages in this study come from the **Gospel of John**. This approach highlights the teachings of Jesus that challenge all of us to put the humanity of our brothers and sisters above all other concerns, just as Jesus did with all those whom he encountered. John’s gospel emphasizes unity with God through belief in Christ, which is manifested in our unity with one another (John 15:1-11), a unity for which Christ himself fervently prayed (John 17:11).

It is rare for people to study issue of sexuality and gender dynamics in the church. To study the topic concerning lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people can be quite radical for many. Why should we in the Christian church

be concerned about this topic? There are several reasons—

- ▼ If you claim that “The Doors of the Church are Open”, is that really the case?
- ▼ People wonder if the church has a relevant message for a world that is rapidly changing its mind about this topic.
- ▼ More and more people feel alienated from church, not just about sexual and gender orientation issues, but based upon being divorced, having an unwed pregnancy, having a physical or mental disability, having a substance abuse issue and the list goes on.
- ▼ If families are divided about how to accept their LGBT children, the church is likely to be also.

The Christian church must understand that when we talk about sexual and gender orientation, we are talking about a life or death issue. People are dying emotionally, spiritually and physically from the condemnation and rejection from family and church communities who don’t understand them. Research shows that rejection from family and faith communities is linked with serious physical and mental health problems for gay youth. For more information regarding this research and how to prevent suicide among gay youth, visit www.familyproject.sfsu.edu.

UMOJA offers a way to read those biblical passages that will cast a new light on traditional debates about LGBT people. **UMOJA** invites every participant to dive into scripture and discover, as if for the first time, the greatest doctrine of all: *God’s love includes all people, without exception!* This program further encourages participants to recognize that all of our relationships are far more valuable than human laws and regulations; this is precisely what Jesus taught. We as family, both biological and church, must ask ourselves the following questions—

- ▼ Are we the church that will allow anyone who desires a relationship with the

Living God to be welcomed?

- ▼ Are we the family that will love, support and encourage one another? Not to tear down, but only build up?
- ▼ Am I the person who is willing to be changed for the sake of the gospel and for the people God loves?

So, what about Leviticus and the argument that we cannot accept gay people because of what the Bible (the law) says? John's Jesus offers a response: "***I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another***" (John 13:34).

Goals of the Umoja Program

UMOJA encourages meaningful, thought-provoking conversation. Participants will have the opportunity to increase their knowledge, awareness, and skills in following areas:

- ▼ exploring their own personal doctrine and values around human diversity;
- ▼ expressing their convictions in ways that do not shame or condemn others;
- ▼ examining the spiritual, emotional and physical impact of rejection and isolation on others;
- ▼ challenging the perception that sexual preference and gender expression only falls into a heterosexual model;
- ▼ distinguishing between fear and faith with our attitudes and behaviors;
- ▼ understanding the parallels between racism and homophobia as harmful practices to their recipients;
- ▼ transforming African-American families and faith communities to become more accepting and affirming of their LGBT "children"; and

- ▼ prioritizing love and family unity above individual and church doctrine.

Program Overview

UMOJA combines individual study with group interaction to incorporate diverse learning styles and to facilitate shared insights within a community of learners. This program also recognizes that most faith communities need time and prayerful reflection before deciding to welcome LGBT people in their midst. Each program session and the accompanying film are designed for African-American audiences to help explore those issues and begin to create new opportunities for unity in families and church communities.

Congregational leaders should set clear expectations for this program in their communities, which will help participants to open themselves to what the Spirit has for them in this work. All persons should be welcomed to participate as long as they are willing to abide by the Godly Guidelines for Christian Conversation, as noted later in this guide. Should participants become unwilling to abide by these guidelines, congregational leaders should feel free to ask them not to participate. A number of elements can be added to this program to make it as welcoming as possible: music, rituals, and allowing time for personal testimonies and story-telling.

Each session is designed for roughly **60 to 90 minutes**. This may vary depending on the number of participants and the conversation itself. These sessions are ideally suited for an adult education forum on Sunday morning or a mid-week Bible study:

Session 1: "Introduction—Our Theology and Tradition." The facilitator will review the goals of the program, establish group norms and administer the assessment tool (optional). Participants will examine their own theological beliefs and traditions that form their position around sexual expression and gender identity.

Session 2: "Unity in the Community." A film that includes testimonials from

theologians and pastors in support of LGBT inclusion in faith communities followed by an exploration of the theological arguments addressed in the film.

Session 3: “Mamma and the Church.” A consideration of the social arguments in the African-American community concerning why LGBT people are not accepted in some families and churches as juxtaposed with the emotional toil it takes on the individuals.

Session 4: “The Content of a Person’s Character.” Comparing and contrasting the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and today’s Gay Rights Movement.

Session 5: “For Faith, For Love, Forever.” An overview of same-gender love and marriage in the African-American community.

Each the five sessions has the following five sections that will help the participants gain the most of the time spent studying the topic—

SCRIPTURE

- ▼ Passages from the Gospel of John that focus on the topic of inclusion

STORY

- ▼ A narrative that sets the tone for the session

APPLICATION

- ▼ Commentary on Scripture and how it relates to the topic of inclusion today

REFLECTION

- ▼ Reflection on the key points of the session

PREPARATION

- ▼ Reading and individual study for the following session



GODLY GUIDELINES

A Covenant for Christian Conversation

- ▼ Jesus said, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34-35).
- ▼ There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear (1 John 4:18).
- ▼ For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another (Romans 12:4-5).

Building and sustaining Christian community requires hard but also joyful work. The work itself can become an occasion for deeper union with each other and God. Christian education is a key component in such community building, and how we learn with each other involves an intentional process of paying attention to the experiences of others. The many distractions of our twenty-first century world can make such attention difficult to sustain. The process of faithful learning thus begins by:

- ▼ Showing up on time and not leaving early;
- ▼ Agreeing to be “here” and “now” when the community gathers;
- ▼ Turning off electronic devices (such as cell phones and pagers).

Christian education will often mean encountering multiple opinions, diverse perspectives, and varied experiences. The following “Godly guidelines” can help to ensure that everyone contributes to the insights of the whole group. Consider adopting these guidelines as a covenant for Christian conversation:

- ▼ Speak directly from your own experience and take responsibility for your own opinions.
- ▼ Engage with each other with the intention of building community.
- ▼ Share the Air"—Allow others time to also share their perspective or story.
- ▼ Respect the God-given dignity of every human being.
- ▼ Acknowledge your misperceptions as well as your insights.
- ▼ Realize that learning often means changing one's mind about something.
- ▼ Avoid interrupting others and allow each person to speak before speaking again.
- ▼ Honor confidentiality unless permission to share outside of the group is explicitly given.

As a Christian community, consider adopting as the primary guide in your work the Apostle Paul's insistence that three things above all others matter most: faith, hope, and love. And even further, as Paul insists, that the greatest of these is love (1 Corinthians 13: 13).





SESSION ONE

Introduction: Our Theology and Tradition

Goals & Outcomes

- ▼ Creating a respectful and sacred space for learning.
- ▼ Introducing the program's goals and logistics.
- ▼ Building community among participants.
- ▼ Assessing where this group stands regarding the Bible, social justice, sexuality, and gender.
- ▼ Recalling and appreciating in new ways the promise of salvation in Jesus extended to all people.

Gathering Ritual

Song: Suggested songs to use throughout the week are “We Are One in the Spirit”, “Koinonia – based on 1 John 4:21”, “Just As I Am”, “Justice and Joy” or “God Made Me Who I Am”

Opening Prayer Themes: Guidance, Unity, Openness, Understanding, Patience, Love

Scripture

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but

people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.”

—John 3:16-21

Story

Jennifer's headache returned. It always developed when she spoke with her mother about going to church. Although she had made it crystal clear to her mother that she no longer felt comfortable in the church she was raised in, her mother would always “shatter her crystal” by quoting the passage from Romans, chapter 1: “God gave them over to shameful lusts. Women exchanged natural for unnatural. They receive the due penalty for their error and God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done.” Her mother would also say, “There are traditional ways for women to behave that have always pleased God.”

No matter how much Jennifer tried to convince her mother that from the moment she asked Jesus Christ to come into her heart she knew nothing could separate her from God's love. Her mother shook her head and told her that “No Way, No How would God ever accept an unrepentant person into the Kingdom who blatantly went against the will of God and it was never God's will for her daughter to be a [slang term for a homosexual]!”

Jennifer had reached her boiling point and shouted at her mother, “Look here woman! I know that I am saved and I have nothing to repent from. Why don't you repent of your sin of judging me?”

At that, there was silence in the room.

Application

Jennifer's mother loves her daughter tremendously, but has a hard time accepting the fact that she is lesbian. Jennifer loves her mother, but is frustrated when she begins to "preach" to her about whom she loves. What her mother sees as correction, Jennifer receives as criticism and condemnation. Since sin is manifested in broken relationships, this mother and daughter relationship is bound by sin. Their relationship has not seen unity in years.

Select from the listed questions which one(s) to discuss.

Question #1: Who do you most identify with in the story of Jennifer and her mother and why? What does your theology and tradition teach about the proper roles of men and women? What have you been taught about the meaning of sin and salvation?

Question #2: We read in John 3:16-17 that it is God's intention that no one should perish and that Jesus did not come to condemn people, but to save them. Is it ever appropriate for Christ's followers to condemn people with their words and actions, even if they feel justified in doing so?

Question #3: In John 3:18, those who do not believe in Christ are already "condemned." This is a strong statement that emphasizes the importance of faith in Jesus. Yet we also read in this passage that whoever believes in Christ is no longer condemned. This is also a strong statement that highlights the incredible grace that is available to believers in Christ. Is anyone excluded from grace in this passage? What about people who have accepted Jesus as Savior, but who also identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender?

Question #4: John 3:19-21 describes the light that has come into the world, showing who lives in the truth of God. Many LGBT Christians testify that they live in that light and have discovered God's grace in Christ. Do we believe them? In the earliest days of the Church, some had trouble believing that Gentiles could receive that grace; some denied the testimony of women who heard the call of God to preach; enslaved African-Americans were even

kept from reading the Bible at all. Yet all of these testified to the light that has come into the world and into their lives. What insights can we gain from those who were questioned about their place at God's table with those who identify as LGBT who tell the church about their relationship with God?

Reflection

John 3:16, one of the most well-known passages in scripture by spiritual and secular people alike, is also one of the most powerful passages in all of the New Testament. This passage answers an age-old question: How do I gain eternal life? The answer is clear: **Whoever** believes in Jesus shall not perish but have eternal life. There is no asterisk next to that claim that lists conditions or the hoops one must jump through in order to gain it. Simple belief in Jesus Christ is the pathway to life everlasting. Some Christian communities today have trouble understanding how lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender people can be included in that great gospel promise, but Jesus puts no conditions on anyone in this passage. The testimony of LGBT people themselves invites us to consider that it is indeed possible to identify as both LGBT and Christian. Later in John's Gospel, Jesus says that the Spirit will lead us further into truth (16:13). Perhaps today, that Spirit among us is urging us deeper in to the truth of LGBT people of faith. The acceptance of LGBT people in the Christian Church is certainly an area of growth for all of us, yet today God is opening hearts to new possibilities of a wide and bountiful harvest of various people all united together by the love of God. The Spirit of Unity is spreading in the Christian Church, and in many places, that Spirit is reuniting parents with their children and parishioners with their congregations.

Preparation

Participants are asked to read the brief essay, "***That You May Believe and Have Life: Reading John's Gospel***," (located in Appendix) and also **John 4:4-42** and **John 5:16-30** in preparation for next week's session and to think about these questions:

- ▼ How did Jesus break the religious law of his day by talking to the woman at the well and what impact did it have on her life?
- ▼ In the passage found in John 5, what did Jesus want and why?
- ▼ What did the religious leaders want and why in that passage?

Closing Prayer Themes

- ▼ Opening hearts to new ways of understanding God's Word in scripture.
- ▼ Trusting the Spirit of Unity to guide our understanding over the course of this program.
- ▼ Seeking new ways to participate in God's bountiful harvest of welcoming those who have been excluded.



SESSION TWO

Unity in the Community

Goals & Outcomes

- ▼ Present theological rationales for the inclusion of LGBT people in the Church.
- ▼ Challenge participants on their biases for welcoming anyone who is considered an “outsider” in the church.

Note: If you have new participants that were not present for Session One, pay particularly close attention to their comfort level. You may want to create time at the beginning to make sure they feel welcomed.

Gathering Ritual

- ▼ Song
- ▼ Opening question, *“Have you shared with others about what you are studying in this Bible study? If so, what comments are you receiving?”*
- ▼ Opening Prayer Themes: Guidance, Unity, Openness, Understanding, Patience, Love

Scripture

“Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in Jesus because of the woman’s testimony, ‘He told me everything I ever did.’ So when the Samaritans came to him, they urged him to stay with them, and he stayed two days. And because of his words many more became believers. They said to the woman, ‘We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world.’”

— John 4:4-42

“Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life.”

—John 5:16-30

Story

The participants watch the film, *“Unity in the Community.”* You can access the video at <https://vimeo.com/57488656> password is umojaunity (no upper case and no space).

Context:

In this film, you will hear from African-American Biblical scholars, theologians and pastors as well as actors from a television show called “Noah’s Arc”, which chronicled the lives of two male characters who end up getting married. The men and women you’ll hear from are from California where the question of marriage for all versus marriage as between a man and women was debated during the ballot initiative called Proposition 8. They will address the topic of unity for all members of the Black church and wider community.

Application

Select from the listed questions which one(s) to discuss.

Question #1: Rev. Irene Monroe, an African-American theologian and community activist in Cambridge, Massachusetts, critiques the silence of the Black Church around issues of sexuality. The Church is to be the agent in our world that leads people to find life more abundantly, however many churches and pastors have been silence or aggressive towards those living with or who have died from HIV and AIDS. After reading her quotes listed below, what is your critique of the Christian Church response the HIV/ AIDS crisis as compared with the message in John’s gospel that all those who have heard God’s word have “passed over from death to life”?

Our silence around issues of identity, sexual practices, and the lack of

pastoral care to people deemed “outsiders” are factors contributing to high-risk sexual behaviors and the transmission of HIV/AIDS in the African American community.

Many in our community turn to their churches first during a crisis. Since the Black Church remains the cornerstone of our communities, it is uniquely positioned to significantly affect knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors within congregations and by extension the entire African American community.

Homophobia in the black community is a public health crisis—looking at issues such as HIV/AIDS, homophobic gang violence, homophobic bullying, and homophobic messages by religious leaders.

— Rev. Irene Monroe

Question #2: Each of the participants in the film described the hurts and hopes for how the Black Church will approach sexuality and same-gender loving people. What insights did you gain from the critique and challenge given to the Black Church in the film? What would you add to those observations or what might trouble you about them?

Question #3: Some Christian churches “demonize” LGBT people. In the film, Rev. Lynice Pinkard shared her vision for the Black Church by saying, “We must refuse to demonize other people and to learn to live in the messiness of life without the protection of weapons.” John’s gospel was written in the “messiness” of divided communities (Jews from Samaritans, early Christians from Jews, men from women). What can we learn from John’s gospel about our own disagreements today? Can we welcome people who are different?

Question #4: In John’s gospel, Jesus showed compassion and acceptance to an “outsider.” He crossed many boundaries to get to this woman—*Jews were not to be in the region where the Samaritans lived; a Rabbi was not to be alone with a woman, etc.* What was the impact of Jesus’ compas-

sion on the woman in that story? How did it affect the people around her? Can we learn anything from this story about the social needs of LGBT people who are considered “outsiders” today?

Question # 5: What are the ways that the African-Americans community has been divided and what has been the impact? When you think about institutional forces, like slavery, and interpersonal factors, such as how light complexioned is one’s skin tone, African-Americans have been exposed to divisive tactics. Do you feel those same divisive tactics are used by African-Americans against LGBT individuals today?

Reflection

John 5:24 tell us that whosoever hears the word of God will not be judged, but has crossed from death to life. Paul made a similar point in his eighth chapter of his letter to the Romans—there is no condemnation in Christ Jesus. These are passages of good news, yet far too many people can’t hear that good news today when preachers and Christian Churches pass judgment on others, condemning them when God has already made them free. Scripture urges us to examine carefully whether Churches are preventing people from crossing over from death to life—spiritually, socially, emotionally, or physically. In John’s gospel, Jesus declares that he has come that all might have life abundantly (10:10) and Paul understood this good news to be entrusted to the Church, to all of us, who have been given the ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:17-19). Let us pray for a renewal of that ministry among us today as the Spirit leads us to help others, including those who are different from us, to pass over from death to life.

Preparation

Participants are asked to read the passages from **John 8, 9, and 10** listed below in preparation for next week’s session and to think about these questions:

- ▼ Imagine yourself in the situation of the woman in **John 8:1-11**. What are the range of emotions you would feel? How would this woman be treated in today's churches?
- ▼ Who are the true Children of God based on **John 8:30-47**?
- ▼ Do you see any connections between the man born blind in **John 9:1-41** how LGBT people are treated today?
- ▼ Why is the Good Shepherd demonized in **John 10**? Do you see any correlation between your answer to that question and why LGBT people are demonized today?

Closing Prayer Themes

- ▼ Seeking the Spirit's gift of unity
- ▼ Being open to new understandings of Scripture
- ▼ Discerning the need for forgiveness and healing



SESSION THREE

The two greatest things LGBT people lose when they come out of the closet are:

Mamma and the Church

Goals & Outcomes

- ▼ Reflect on the powerful influence, both for good and for ill, for blessing and for pain, which one's family has on LGBT-identified individuals.
- ▼ Reflect on the power and influence pastors and church communities have either to welcome people into God's new life or prevent them from hearing the Gospel.
- ▼ Present methods for recovering from rejection and verbal and spiritual abuse that are sometimes inflicted on LGBT-identified individuals.

Gathering Ritual

- ▼ Song
- ▼ Opening Question: *"What have your reflections been throughout the week about what we are studying here?"*
- ▼ Opening Prayer Themes: Family, Peace, Togetherness

Scripture

1. When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."

—John 8:12, 34-36

2. "Is this your son?" they asked. "Is this the one you say was born blind? How is it that now he can see?" "We know he is our son," the parents answered, "and we know he was born blind. But how he can see now, or who opened his eyes, we don't know. Ask him. He is of age; he will speak for himself." His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders, who already had decided that anyone who acknowledged that Jesus was the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. That was why his parents said, "He is of age; ask him."

—John 9:19-23

3. Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me— just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep.

I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.

The Jews who heard these words were again divided. Many of them said, "He is demon-possessed and raving mad. Why listen to him?" But others said, "These are not the sayings of a man possessed by a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?"

—John 10:14 -16, 19-21

Story

Richard attended for the first time a community center support group for Black gay men. He was surprised to see the wide range of ages present in the room. Some looked to be in their late 50s or 60s and others were barely out of high school. As the facilitator began to recap the session from last week, one of the 19-year old men said, "I had a rough night last night. My father and I got into it again. This time he told me he would rather I was a crack-head than be gay."

"I can top that," a 21-year old chimed in. "My mother told me that she wished I were dead!" A cold silence filled the room. It left Richard to imagine, "What would cause a parent to wish that her own flesh and blood were dead rather than be gay? Is this life we live so horrible?"

Application

Divide into three smaller groups to reflect on the story and the scripture we heard from John's Gospel. In your smaller group, read the reflection below and then select one of the questions from either John 8, John 9 or John 10. After 10 minutes of discussion, return to the larger group and share your responses with the other participants.

The story about the community center is based on an actual event. That group included young men suffering from the words and rejection of their parents. The parents may have meant well, thinking that by threatening their sons with withdrawal from the family would frighten them so much that they would "change their ways."

The complete title of this session is "The greatest two things we lose when we come out of the closet are Mamma and the Church." This statement was uttered during yet another gay Black men's discussion group. This line was so profound that all of the men in the room shook their heads in affirmation and some even said, "Amen!" For Black lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals, we deeply love our mothers (and/or families) and we deeply love our home churches. The price of rejection and excommunication is too high a price to pay for many to come out of the closet. So in fear and shame, many suffer in silence willing to live a lie in order to please those around them.

- ▼ Questions for John Chapter 8: In this passage, Jesus explains how to gain a permanent place in the family of God by following him. According to this passage, once a person is saved from darkness and is set free from sin, they cannot be lost. If an LGBT person decides to follow Jesus, is it really up to them to obtain their own salvation since Jesus already obtained it on their

behalf (especially when this is not the case for anyone else)? If that LGBT person retains their same-gender loving attraction or varied gender identity after believing in their heart and confessing with their mouth that Jesus is Lord, have they lost their permanent place in the family of God?

- ▼ Questions for John Chapter 9: The religious leaders put the parents of the man formerly blind on the hot seat, demanding to know how he was made whole. Imagine if you were in the shoes of the parents and the pastor and religious leaders of your church asked, "How can you have a son or daughter who is gay and still claim they are a follower of God?" Would you respond like these parents (afraid of the backlash from the leaders) or would you stand up for your son or daughter? If your LGBT child told you they felt whole because Jesus saved him or her from sin, but their sexuality or gender expression was not one of their sins, how would you respond?
- ▼ Questions for John Chapter 10: Jesus affirms that he is the Good Shepherd who lies down his life for his sheep. What do you think Jesus meant when he told the Pharisees that there will be one flock and one shepherd with sheep drawn from other "pens"? Do you think Jesus would share this same message today with religious leaders regarding LGBT Christians? Why or why not? This message of inclusion that Jesus taught was interpreted by some as crazy talk, and that he was possessed by a demon. How might we consider the connections between the reason why Jesus was demonized for welcoming all of his sheep and how some religious leaders and congregations treat LGBT people today?

Reflection

Many LGBT people describe living in the closet as like wearing shoes that are two sizes too small or wearing a jacket that is two sizes too small. It makes life cramped, painful, and gives a back ache. Some people cannot live their life by constantly keeping secrets from the ones they love. Others receive a clear message from the ones they love that they better keep quiet or else! Thus they live

life with shades of gray rather than brilliant color. Jesus offers a life that is free of shame and guilt because he loves and accepts completely! There are many LGBT people, including their families and their churches, who have discovered this truth and enjoy life in unity with God and one another.

Unfortunately, many other Christians have not found this freedom and instead demonize their loved ones for the sake of a particular view of Christianity. Demonizing, excommunicating, or simply withdrawing love and care from others will not lead people to change and to grow into the abundant life Jesus offers. It causes deep wounds and damage that can alienate a person from God and from the community they need. Many people experience God's love and acceptance through the love and acceptance of their family and faith community. Let us pray that the Spirit will move in our hearts to see all people as wonderful, uniquely crafted gifts from God; no one is "damaged goods" and no one need be ashamed of who they are.

Preparation

Participants are asked to read **John 11:37-57; 12:1-10**; and **13:1-20** in preparation for next week's session and to consider these questions:

- ▼ How does Jesus provide life to those who need it most?
- ▼ What are the themes of inequality that you notice in these passages and what are the ways that Jesus addresses them?

Closing Prayer Themes

- ▼ Seeking the Spirit's gift of unity
- ▼ Being open to new understandings of Scripture
- ▼ Discerning the need for forgiveness and healing
- ▼ Holding all families in prayer and love



SESSION FOUR

The Content of a Person's Character

Goals & Outcomes

- ▼ Looking at scripture in new ways that highlight the liberation of all people.
- ▼ Encourage an understanding of God's desire that all people be treated with fairness and dignity.
- ▼ Highlight comparisons between the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and today's Gay Rights Movement, encouraging members to see that civil rights apply to everyone.

Gathering Ritual

- ▼ Song
- ▼ Opening Question: *"In your own K-12 education, did you feel that the information given to you about Black History in American was accurate? Who benefits when misinformation about Black History is shared with students?"*
- ▼ Opening Prayer Themes: Liberation, Sacrifice, Peace

Scripture

1. "Then Jesus said, 'Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?' So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, 'Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.' When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' The dead man came out, his hands and feet

wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, 'Take off the grave clothes and let him go.'

Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin. 'What are we accomplishing?' they asked. 'Here is this man performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our temple and our nation.' Then one of them, named Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, spoke up, 'You know nothing at all! You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.' He did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one. So from that day on they plotted to take his life."

—John 11: 40 – 44; 47 – 53

2. "Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honor. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, 'Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages.' He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it. 'Leave her alone,' Jesus replied. 'It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me.'"

—John 12: 1 – 7

3. "Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the

meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. 'Do you understand what I have done for you?' he asked them. 'You call me Teacher and Lord, and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.'"

—John 13:3 – 5; 12 – 17

Story

At Milton High School, Mrs. Causey was preparing her students for the annual Dr. Martin Luther King program. "Class," she announced, "You all know what a tremendous leader Dr. King was and the great courage he had as he stood up for the humanity and dignity of all people. His tragic death was not in vain because it led to many more people understanding that racial segregation is plain wrong."

"Mrs. Causey?" asked one of her students.

"Yes, Sheila?" she replied.

"Since Dr. King stood up for the rights of all people, did he also stand up for the rights of gay people?" she asked seriously.

"What? That's an odd question. What made you decide to ask that?" Mrs. Causey asked surprised.

"I heard on television that there are people saying that the same freedom that Dr. King fought for applies to gay and lesbian people as they want their freedom," Sheila explained.

Shaking her head in disbelief with her eyes closed, Mrs. Causey explained to the misguided student, "Sheila, don't let those people confuse you. The Civil Rights movement addressed real discrimination and real issues. What those people want you to believe is that they are suffering and need the same rights as everyone else. Those people can get jobs, go to the school of their choice and have housing. It is a shame that people want to dilute the message of Dr. King and apply it to nonsense."

"But Mrs. Causey," Sheila asked, "isn't the reason why gay and lesbian people can have all those rights because Dr. King's message was about equality for all people no matter who they are? Just like you told us before, things are not perfect and we must continue to stand up for what is right until victory is won for everyone."

"We don't have time to discuss equality for all people," Mrs. Causey said sharply. "We have to get back to preparing for the Dr. King program. Now, who has the 'I Have A Dream' speech ready to read?"

Application

Mandy Carter, a social activist and community organizer, once said: "Prejudice is prejudice—whether it is based on skin color or sexual orientation! And maybe the best folks to be making this point are gays and lesbians of color who embody both." That's a powerful statement and it raises all sorts of questions about the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement in this country. Let's discuss this in light of the Scripture passages we have just heard:

Select from the listed questions which one(s) to discuss.

Question #1: Was Sheila being disrespectful to Mrs. Causey by making a comparison of the struggle LGBT people face today to the struggle African-Americans faced during the Civil Rights Movement? Why or why not?

Question #2: The passage from John 11 presents a very strange thing—a

miracle of life leading to a death plot. The religious leaders could not and did not want to acknowledge Jesus as the giver of life. Consider the Freedom Riders, Bus Boycotters, those who marched, those who sat down, and those who were martyred during the fight for civil rights in America. They knew very well how something that is meant for good can be categorized as evil by leaders who refuse to see the injustice of their own actions. How do you see the relationship between powerful authorities in John 11 and those in power during the Civil Rights Movement?

Question #3: John 12:1–7 gives us a window in the intentions of the human heart. Mary acted out of pure love and devotion towards Jesus. Judas acted out of selfishness. Jesus stood up for Mary's actions although she violated tradition, since women were not permitted to take such an intimate posture towards a male authority, a rabbi, like Jesus by touching, eating and talking to him. She also seemed to be wasteful in using such a large amount of perfume! Perception and knowing the full story of others is important. What connections do you see between this passage and those who are labeled as troublemakers when they are motivated by their passion?

Question #4: The passage found in John 13 illustrates a great act of loving service and the reversal of power – Jesus, the teacher, becoming a servant. What was Jesus teaching his disciples about how they should view those whom they would eventually serve? What lesson might we take from Jesus regarding our own position in society compared to the concerns of others who have a lesser status?

Question #5: A simplistic definition of “civil rights” is the protections and privileges given to all citizens by law. When a LGBT person says that their civil rights are being denied when they are denied housing, employment or admission to an organization or institution based on their sexual or gender identity, do you agree or disagree with them? Should a person's religious convictions about LGBT people be a valid basis for denying them access to life, liberty and their pursuit of happiness?

Question #6: When we think about the documents that give authority, such as the Bible and the US Constitution, we have much respect for the words and ideals they contain. However, during our nation's history, African-Americans challenged the laws of this land that defined them as being 3/5ths of human being and said they needed to be segregated from Whites. In his day, Jesus challenged the Jewish law that said Jews were to avoid anything or anyone what was considered “unclean” (such as the Gentiles). Jesus did this to communicate to his disciples that these Gentiles were God's children also and deserved to be welcomed. Since a precedent has already been set to challenge the authoritative words and ideas that label and stigmatize people, do you agree or disagree with the argument that LGBT people have the right to challenge the interpretation scripture that would seem to make them less than worthy of God's blessings and care?

Read the following statements from Mandy Carter and to offer short, two-sentence reflection/reaction to each.

- ▼ “One of the main founders of the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s was a Black gay man—Bayard Rustin—who borrowed his words and inspiration from Gandhi, as did Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King.”
- ▼ “No one ‘owns’ a movement. The ideas and words are free for all to be inspired from.”
- ▼ “Gay does not mean White. There were gay and lesbian Blacks who were discriminated against at lunch counters, drinking fountains, and segregated in society just as all other Blacks were in America.”
- ▼ “Borrowing from the words of poet Audre Lorde, ‘There is no hierarchy of oppression.’ One group's pain is not greater than another's. It is heartless to assert otherwise.”
- ▼ “The point of the Civil Rights Movement was not to secure the opportunities just for Blacks, but to gain equality for all people. Looking at the words of Martin Luther King at the end of his life will show this to be true.”

- ▼ “James Byrd, a black man in Texas who was dragged from the back of a pick-up truck until he died, and Matthew Shepard, a young gay white man who was beaten and tortured to death in Wyoming, are two examples of how hatred knows no color or sexual orientation. What happened to them was evil no matter what “group” (black or gay) they were members of. Bigotry is an equal opportunity disease.”

Reflection

Delroy Constantine-Sims, in his book, *The Greatest Taboo: Homosexuality in Black Communities*, offers the following food for thought. “Whether the black church community should accept homosexuality among its members becomes an unnecessary and irrelevant question. Homosexuality is a part of human sexuality, just as African-Americans are a part of the human race. Thus there will always be African-American lesbians, gays, and bisexuals within and outside of church communities. The question therefore becomes whether African-American heterosexuals are going to practice justice towards their daughters, sons, sisters and brothers, mothers, fathers, and fellow Christians who are lesbian and gay.”

Coretta Scott King spoke these profound words during the 25th anniversary luncheon for Lambda Defense and Education Fund in 1998: “I still hear people say that I should not be talking about the rights of lesbian and gay people and I should stick to the issue of racial justice... But I hasten to remind them that Martin Luther King, Jr., said, ‘Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere’ ... I appeal to everyone who believes in Martin Luther King, Jr.’s dream to make room at the table of brotherhood and sisterhood for lesbian and gay people.”

Preparation

Participants are asked to read **John 14:1-14; 15:1-26; 16:5-13; 17:1-26** in preparation for the next session and to consider these questions:

- ▼ Have you experienced peace from God? What was it like?
- ▼ What kind of love does Jesus urge his followers to show each other?
- ▼ What would it take for our communities to live into the unity that Jesus prayed for?

Closing Prayer Themes

- ▼ Comfort for all those who experience any kind of injustice or oppression
- ▼ Openness to the Spirit of Unity among all people, regardless of race, sexuality, or gender
- ▼ Asking for healing in our communities
- ▼ Giving thanks for pioneering leaders and visionaries who inspire us to work for justice



SESSION FIVE

For Faith, For Love, Forever

Goals & Outcomes

- ▼ Provide an expanded view of marriage equality based on love and justice.
- ▼ Conclude the program and brainstorm ways for continuing this conversation regarding inclusion of LGBT people in the church.

Gathering Ritual

- ▼ Song
- ▼ Opening Question: *"What does scripture teach about following: the authority of women, war and dispossessing other nations of their land, slavery and observing the Sabbath?"*
- ▼ Opening Prayer Themes: Equality, Fairness, Opportunity

Scripture

1. "Jesus replied, 'Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. Anyone who does not love me will not obey my teaching. These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me. All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.'"

—John 14:23–27

2. "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have

kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. This is my command: Love each other."

—John 15:9–17

3. "Jesus said, 'I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours. All I have is yours, and all you have is mine. And glory has come to me through them. I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one.'

"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world. Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them.'"

—John 17:9–11; 20–26

Story

Ricky had never been as nervous as he was when he pulled up to his father's home that scorching July afternoon. He had wondered if the air conditioning in his car had quit only to realize that he had it cranked to maximum. He was still hot.

As he left the car and began the short walk to the front porch, it had felt like it was the longest walk he had ever taken. He dreaded having to knock on the front door, but before he had the chance, he heard the gruff voice of his father saying, "Come on in boy," as he stood at the screen door to the home. Ricky entered and said, "How are you pop?" Without acknowledgement of the question, his father asked, "So what you want to see me about?"

Ricky had not been to his childhood home since the day his father threw him out after he discovered the letters his boyfriend had written him. That was the most painful day for the two of them. They had since talked on birthdays and holidays, but their conversations stayed only on the surface of things. They both desired to have the relationship they shared once upon a time, but didn't know how to get it back. Ricky had taken the initiative to try to rekindle their father/son connection again by taking a bold step—telling the truth.

With a quiver in his voice, Ricky managed to get out, "Well Pop, you see I wanted to tell you in person that I am getting married."

"What do you mean married? People like you don't get married" his father shot back. "Unless you finally came to your senses and found a girl to be with. Is that it?"

"No sir. I am still with Anthony; we are going to have a ceremony and I would like it a lot if you would consider coming."

"No! Out of the question," his father replied without even looking at his son. Looking to end the awkward moment, he said, "What else did you want?"

"Well I hoped for another answer, but it is what I expected. I wanted to let you

know that I won't be coming back home again and I won't be calling again either. I have a new family, Pop. Anthony and his family love and welcome me as a member of their family and I love them. I have tried to include you in my life, but it is clear that you don't want to be a part of it. I can't continue to have a part-time, some-time father. I love you, Pop, and I always will," Ricky said courageously.

"Well, wait a minute," his father said reflectively.

"Yes?" Ricky asked with anticipation.

Application

We heard some quotes from Mandy Carter last week, a social activist and community organizer. Here's another: "Family alienation happens for many LGBT people, so same-sex marriage is vital to build new families." Let's think about that quote in light of the Scripture passages we have just heard:

Select from the listed questions which one(s) to discuss.

Question #1: Ricky told his father that he tried to include him in his life. If the father didn't want to be a part of Ricky's life, he had plans on creating a new family that would love and support him. What are the ways that African-Americans have had various configurations of family that do not fit the nuclear model of father, mother and two children? What are the elements that need to be present in order to have a happy and healthy relationship?

Question #2: The passage from John 14 evokes the powerful images of "home" and "peace." What are the ways that a heart may be troubled or afraid with the absence of home and security (peace)? What are the ways an individual or a family can gain home and security?

Question #3: In John 15 we read that remaining in God's love means remaining true to the commandments that are given to us. Jesus was not referring to the Ten Commandments but something broader and even deeper:

the values that produce peace and a sense of home in our hearts. Many same gender-loving couples are being true to the values in their hearts by giving their lives in committed relationships—and it produces joy! Jesus offers a powerful way to love others by not treating them as subordinates, but elevating them to an equal status. Should the love between two individuals ever be seen as subordinate, such as wives being subordinate to their husbands or same-gender love subordinate to heterosexual love? Could we find a theological rationale in this passage that would support a person's choice to serve and love another person of the same gender?

Question #4: While on the cross, Jesus prayed for his followers. He summarized his mission during his prayer, which is that all people be brought into complete unity with God, with him, and with each other. With all of our differences, does that kind of unity seem reasonable? Does unity mean that everyone will be the same? How do we find unity in the midst of our diversity?

The participants gather into three smaller groups and spend ten minutes brainstorming together on the following questions:

Jesus demonstrated love through his actions, by sitting and eating with the “least” in his society, touching the untouchable, and loving those no one else would love. Discuss in your small groups the following questions in light of the love of Jesus for all people and be prepared to share the two most important points from your group with the larger group:

- ▼ How would you rate today's church communities in proclaiming the same kind of love Jesus showed in his life and teaching?
- ▼ Who are the “least” in our society today and what kind of love and support do they need?
- ▼ In what ways could this church community provide a place where all people find peace and a “home”?

Reflection

After the smaller groups share their reflections to the questions, conclude with this Reflection:

Can we imagine the Black Church, every single congregation, welcoming their lesbian and gay children into the fold “just as they are?” Can we imagine how to read the Bible as a way to love all people rather than excluding some? The mission of the Christian Church is to call people from death and into abundant life, and to equip them to live as a wellspring of life that overflows into the lives of others. Sadly, many congregations have missed this calling when they choose status over helping the homeless; or when they choose reputation over helping the pregnant teenager; or when they choose wealth over helping those living in poverty within their own community; or when they choose popularity over accepting women who have been shunned because of divorce; or when they choose the elitism of being heterosexual over welcoming gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender people.

All those who are marginalized seek the face of God and hope to find a home and a place where they can be welcomed as their authentic selves—to be welcomed just as Jesus welcomed all. The Church that follows Jesus is the Church eager to share with everyone the good news of God's extravagant love, a love so wide and inclusive that there aren't any second-class members in God's house and no outcasts, a house where everyone is at home, precious and honored.

Everyone faces difficulties, and the “least of these” among us face all kinds of trials and tribulations—substance abuse, physical abuse, self-hatred and guilt, sexually-transmitted diseases, HIV & AIDS, and rejection from family, friends, employers, politicians, and even preachers. Yet the human spirit is resilient and people do find hope. They do find peace. They do find family and people to love and acceptance. But do people find all these Gospel qualities in Church? Is this Church one of the places where everyone can find that kind of abundant life, the life that Jesus said he came to give?

Closing Prayer Themes

- ▼ Thanksgiving for the opportunity to be together and to learn
- ▼ Praise for the God who is always calling us to new life and new understanding
- ▼ Wisdom and insight for how this program's material will lead us into the future
- ▼ A pouring out of the Spirit of Unity on the whole Church that we may give a powerful witness to the Gospel in the world



EVALUATION

Improving the Program

THE UMOJA PROJECT presents

Unity in the Community Bible Study

Please help us continue to provide high-quality events and programming by completing this evaluation form.

1. How many sessions of Umoja did you attend

2. Please comment on the following:

a. Overall impression of the Umoja Bible Study:

☐ Excellent ☐ Above average ☐ Average ☐ Below average ☐ Poor

b. Overall quality of content:

☐ Excellent ☐ Above average ☐ Average ☐ Below average ☐ Poor

c. Overall quality of the facilitator:

☐ Excellent ☐ Above average ☐ Average ☐ Below average ☐ Poor

3. Please comment on the following individual session – if applicable:

a. Quality of the content for **session 1**—“Our Theology and Traditions”

☐ Excellent ☐ Above average ☐ Average ☐ Below average ☐ Poor

b. Quality of the content for **session 2** – “Unity in the Community”

☐ Excellent ☐ Above average ☐ Average ☐ Below average ☐ Poor

c. Quality of the content for **session 3** —“Mamma and the Church”

☐ Excellent ☐ Above average ☐ Average ☐ Below average ☐ Poor

d. Quality of the content for **session 4**—“The Content of a Person’s Character”

☐ Excellent ☐ Above average ☐ Average ☐ Below average ☐ Poor

e. Quality of the content for **session 5**—“For Faith, For Love, Forever”

☐ Excellent ☐ Above average ☐ Average ☐ Below average ☐ Poor

4. How could we improve this Bible Study?

6. We appreciate your input. Do you have any other comments for us about this event?

5. Your suggestions for follow-up activities:



Thank you for your participation, sharing and openness over the past 5 weeks.



OPTIONAL PRE AND POST TEST

For Congregations who would like to assess if **Umoja: Unity in the Community** has helped participants move toward greater inclusion of LGBT people.

Instructions: Use before or during Session One. Participants do not place their name on the pre-test. After completing, have the participants place their pre-test in an envelope and place their name on the outside. At the end of the study, have participants fill out the same form as a post-test. Return the pre-test to the participants so they can see for themselves if there has been any change. The facilitator can then collect both pre and post tests for their own information about the movement from the study.

Please take the time to fill out this brief survey of your thoughts, feelings, and convictions about the following questions.

I would accept a person who is gay or lesbian: (check all that apply):

- ☐ In no area of my life
- ☐ In my work, or social life, or neighborhood, but not at church
- ☐ As a visitor to my church
- ☐ As a member of my church, as long as they are discreet about being gay (discreet? celibate? chaste?)
- ☐ As a member of my church and fully open about being gay
- ☐ As a member of my church together with their same-sex partner
- ☐ As a lay leader
- ☐ As a minister

I would accept a person who is bisexual: (check all that apply):

- ☐ In no area of my life
- ☐ In my work, or social life, or neighborhood, but not at church
- ☐ As a visitor to my church
- ☐ As a member of my church, as long as they are discreet about being gay (discreet? celibate? chaste?)
- ☐ As a member of my church and fully open about being gay
- ☐ As a member of my church together with their same-sex partner
- ☐ As a lay leader
- ☐ As a minister

I would accept a person who is transgender: (check all that apply):

- ☐ In no area of my life
- ☐ In my work, or social life, or neighborhood, but not at church
- ☐ As a visitor to my church
- ☐ As a member of my church, as long as they are discreet about being gay (discreet? celibate? chaste?)
- ☐ As a member of my church and fully open about being gay
- ☐ As a member of my church together with their same-sex partner
- ☐ As a lay leader
- ☐ As a minister

Put a checkmark in the box that best matches your opinion today.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I believe people make a choice to be gay. It is not something you are born with.				
God created and loves gay and lesbian people just as they are.				
Whatever my Pastor and church elders teach about sexuality, that's what I believe.				
People who are in a relationship with someone of the same gender can also be Christians.				
The Bible is the inerrant Word of God and there is very little room for interpretation.				
Sometimes it is ok for Christians to exclude people from the Church based on the lives they lead.				
The Civil Rights Movement was a movement to secure equality for all people, not just black people.				
The Church is a place where anyone can be welcomed into God's abundant life, including people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender.				
I believe the Bible teaches that marriage is only between a man and a woman.				



FACILITATOR'S GUIDE

Preparation for Congregations and Facilitators

Every educational program requires intentional and collaborative modes of preparation, both for the community and the facilitators. The following are just a few suggestions to make UMOJA a successful program in your own community.

Congregational Preparation

- ▼ Pastoral and/or congregational leadership should consider carefully when this kind of educational program ought to take place and then ideally allow at least two months of lead time to promote and prepare the congregation for the program. Church leadership may want to “take the temperature” of the congregation before beginning and to assure there is no objection to proceeding with this kind of program.
- ▼ Transparency in all matters is always recommended and here it would be very useful to be clear about the goals of this program up front—what it will and will not cover.
- ▼ Paying attention to other church activities or the liturgical season in which the program might be offered can make a difference to the success of **UMOJA**. The introspection of the Lenten season, for example, might be suitable for this kind of program.
- ▼ It is best to decide early on whether this program will involve an “open” or “closed” group. An open group allows people to join once the program has begun. A closed group does not allow additional people to join after the first or second session, which can help to provide a sense of cohesion and

trust among the participants. Either approach will work with this program, but the decision should be made early on and communicated clearly to the congregation.

Facilitator Preparation

- ▼ Facilitators should read through the entire curriculum well before the program launches in order to have materials prepared in advance and to make adjustments based on a particular congregation's needs, and to make notes in the margins to anticipate various reactions to the material. Decide whether you would want to expand beyond the five weeks if it is accessed the group needs more time for discussion and processing.
- ▼ **Scripture Translation:** The passages that are listed in this study come from the New International Version. If you choose to use another version that better fits the needs of your group, please feel free to do so. The scripture translation will not have an impact upon the lesson.
- ▼ Facilitators for this program are not expected to be “experts” in the topics considered. The facilitator's role is to create space for sharing insights, posing questions, and discerning next steps as a group.
- ▼ This guide provides a way to invite a Christian faith community into a process of shared learning. The suggestions for facilitators in this guide are not meant to be followed to the letter and can be adapted for particular community needs.
- ▼ The facilitator is encouraged to enhance the learning experience by allowing ample time for dialogue and storytelling, using additional readings, or creating a project based upon the content of the sessions. While this is a five session study, feel free to expand the number of sessions to thoroughly cover the topics. For example, create a “sixth” session just to cover the information found in the “Life Abundant” section.

- ▼ A succinct way to describe the goal of **Umoja: Unity in the Community**, it is about assisting the participants to develop a personal doctrine (one's belief system) that leads to greater inclusion of others. Each participant will bring his or her personal doctrine that has been developed over time by their own reading of scripture and by those pastors and teachers who have taught them. Be prepared to work with individuals who have a very clear understanding on their own doctrine and those who have not given much thought to what they believe. All are welcomed and this study will allow multiple viewpoints to connect with the material.
- ▼ The last item in the Appendix is a position paper by The Rev. Dr. Jay E. Johnson on "**Biblical Sexuality and Gender**". This can be incorporated into any of the lessons or assigned as outside reading. It covers a Biblical approach to the passages of scripture that are interpreted as condemning same sex behavior and gender expression.
- ▼ Not every question needs to be answered. In topics concerning faith, theology, and spirituality, there are many questions that simply cannot be answered adequately. Moreover, no one (either ordained or lay) is an encyclopedia. It is perfectly acceptable to answer a question by saying, "I don't know," or "I'm not sure; does anyone else here have a suggestion?"
- ▼ Most curricular programs raise concerns that may not be directly related to the program's goals. Facilitators can acknowledge respectfully particular issues that are raised but which many not be relevant to the program and then gently nudge the conversation back to the topic at hand.
- ▼ All facilitators are frequently tempted to avoid conflict, and in some cases, that's a good instinct. But disagreements are often the seeds for wider communal insights. Without stopping conversation, a facilitator can remind everyone of the importance of respectful dialogue and how our diverse perspectives can yield fresh insights. It's also perfectly acceptable to invite a group to "agree to disagree" on a particular point and remind the group that "unity" need not require "uniformity" of opinion.

Tips for Facilitating Christian Conversation

- ▼ To be effective, Christian education need not achieve perfect agreement among the participants. Learning how to remain in community with people with whom we may disagree can deepen a congregation's shared life and ministry. Facilitators might consider setting that kind of tone early on in this program.
- ▼ Facilitating conversation requires careful discernment of the collective energy of a group as well as the unique personalities of the participants. The "Godly Guidelines" for Christian conversation included in this Guide can be a useful tool for encouraging respectful interaction in group settings; facilitators are encouraged to return to this tool frequently during the program.
- ▼ Inviting participation from all the participants will sometimes involve noticing whether some members speak more than others and gently inviting equal space for everyone to contribute.

Setting the Space

Many congregations are already well practiced at setting appropriate spaces for learning and conversation. This part of planning, however, is important. Education is as much a "sacred" endeavor as worship and liturgy. Just as a congregation seeks to make worship space welcoming, so also should a community's educational space be set. Here are just a few suggestions:

- ▼ Unless the number of participants precludes this, create a circle or semi-circle of chairs to help the participants engage with each other.
- ▼ Subtle and simple elements can be added (like candles, fabric coverings on tables, etc.) to help create a more "sacred space" for the learning and conversation.

- ▼ A sufficient number of handouts or worksheets should be printed and ready before the beginning of each session.
- ▼ Provide writing instruments and paper for those wanting to take notes.
- ▼ A television/monitor and DVD player will be needed to view the film resources during the program.

Recommended Reading for Further Study

For participants wanted additional materials on the topic of LGBT inclusion and welcome in the Black church, the following books are highly recommended—

- ▼ **Title:** *Their Own Received Them Not: African-American Lesbian & Gays in the Black Church*
Author: Rev. Dr. Horace L. Griffin
Publisher and Date: The Pilgrim Press, 2006
- ▼ **Title:** *Sexuality and the Black Church*
Author: Dr. Kelly Brown Douglas
Publisher and Date: Orbis Books, 1999
- ▼ **Title:** *A Whosoever Church*
Author: Gary Comstock
Publisher and Date: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001
- ▼ **Title:** *The Greatest Taboo: Homosexuality in Black Communities*
Editor: Delroy Constantine-Simms
Publisher and Date: Alyson Books, 2001

FACILITATOR NOTES FOR THE SESSIONS:

SESSION ONE

Introduction: Our Theology and Tradition

Note: In preparation for this first session, participants should read “Life Abundant: A Theological and Spiritual Framework for the Living OutFront Curriculum Project” before arriving for this session. As an option, create a “pre session” to allow time to discuss and process the “Life Abundant” section.

Program Introduction

The facilitator offers an introduction to the program by sharing:

- ▼ the goals of the program;
- ▼ the logistics for the sessions (length, time, place, open or closed group);
- ▼ the Godly Guidelines for Conversation;
- ▼ an optional assessment tool for measuring the level of comfort and information participants have with the topic (found in the Appendix);
- ▼ ask for commitment to complete the study and contact facilitator if uncomfortable

The facilitator then invites the participants to introduce themselves with the following (or similar) points of information:

- ▼ name and how long that person has been a member or attendee of the congregation;
- ▼ for non-congregational settings, what does the person do for a living
- ▼ why each person agreed to attend this study;
- ▼ what each person hopes to learn from the study;

- ▼ how each person learns best (through listening, talking, reading, thinking quietly, etc.)

Suggestions for the Application and Reflection

The Facilitator invites the group into a time of shared reflection and conversation about Jennifer's story and the scripture passage from John's Gospel. Based upon the direction the conversation takes and the time remaining, **select from the listed questions which one(s) to discuss**. Invite a participant to read aloud the questions and/or reflection. After introducing this time of conversation, each of the questions should be given no more than 5 or 6 minutes for responses; the Facilitator should also gently keep the participants focused on the question and nudge them back if they start addressing other concerns. **The facilitator is encouraged to choose from the following options.**

Then Facilitator brings the conversation to a close and offers the Reflection by asking a volunteer to read it aloud. If time permits, ask for any reactions or reflections:

SESSION TWO

Unity in the Community

Note about the Film "Unity in the Community"

If the film did not accompany this curriculum, it can be obtained as a Vimeo download. You can access the video at <https://vimeo.com/57488656> password is umojaunity (no upper case and no space).

If you choose not to view the video, use the "Story" portion of the evening as an extended check-in time about what your participants felt about the first session or any other current topic relating to LGBT inclusion in the church.

Suggestions for the Application and Reflection

The Facilitator invites the group into a time of shared reflection and conversa-

tion about the film "Unity in the Community" and the scripture passage from John's Gospel. Based upon the direction the conversation takes and the time remaining, **select from the listed questions which one(s) to discuss**. Invite a participant to read aloud the questions and/or reflection. After introducing this time of conversation, each of the questions should be given no more than 5 or 6 minutes for responses; the Facilitator should also gently keep the participants focused on the question and nudge them back if they start addressing other concerns.

Then Facilitator brings the conversation to a close and asks a volunteer to read the mediation aloud. If time permits, ask for any reactions or reflections.

SESSION THREE

Mamma and the Church

Suggestions for the Application and Reflection

The Facilitator invites the group into a time of shared reflection and conversation about the story from the community center and the scripture passages from John's Gospel. After introducing this time of conversation with the following, **the participants are divided into three smaller groups and each group reads the reflection and is assigned one of the questions below from either John 8, 9 or 10**. After no more than 10 minutes of small group discussion, one member from each group shares two or three of their responses with the larger group.

Divide into three smaller groups to reflect on the story and the scripture we heard from John's Gospel. In your smaller group, read the reflection below and then **select one** of the questions from either John 8, John 9 or John 10. After 10 minutes of discussion, return to the larger group and share your responses with the other participants.

After each small group has shared—briefly!— what their groups discussed, the Facilitator asks for a volunteer to read the mediation. If time permits, ask for any reactions or reflections:

SESSION FOUR

The Content of a Person's Character

Suggestions for the Application and Reflection

The Facilitator invites the group into a time of shared reflection and conversation about the Dr. King Day story and the Scripture passages from John. Based upon the direction the conversation takes and the time remaining, **select from the listed questions which one(s) to discuss**. Invite a participant to read aloud the questions and/or reflection. After introducing this time of conversation, each of the questions should be given no more than 5 or 6 minutes for responses; the Facilitator should also gently keep the participants focused on the question and nudge them back if they start addressing other concerns.

Then Facilitator brings the conversation to a close and offers the Reflection by asking a volunteer to read aloud. If time permits, ask for any reactions or reflections:

SESSION FIVE

For Faith, For Love, Forever

Additional Film Resource

An excellent film to use in this session that illustrates marriage and family from a Black lesbian perspective and as an alternative to the story is "**The Gift of Family**". *This is a powerful documentary that illustrates the complex and everyday stories of Black lesbians raising children. From family meals to prayer to story time, this poignant film reveals relationship with the larger Black community and the Black church, grappling with the white-led marriage equality movement, as well as ordinary dealings with racism, sexism and homophobia.* The Gift of Family film and study guide can be purchased through Queer Women of Color Media Arts Project—distribution@qwocmap.org or 415-752-0868.

Suggestions for the Application and Reflection

The Facilitator invites the group into a time of shared reflection and conversation about the story of the young man getting married and the scripture passages from John's Gospel. Based upon the direction the conversation takes and the time remaining, **select from the listed questions which one(s) to discuss**. Invite a participant to read aloud the questions and/or reflection. After introducing this time of conversation, each of the questions should be given no more than 5 or 6 minutes for responses; the Facilitator should also gently keep the participants focused on the question and nudge them back if they start addressing other concerns.

After the smaller groups share their reflection, the Facilitator concludes with the Reflection.



THAT YOU MAY BELIEVE: Background to John's gospel

Philip Fogarty SJ takes a look at the circumstances behind the writing of the Gospel of St John, which emerged from the tension between early Christian communities and Jewish leaders.

Towards the end of the first century AD, the great city of Ephesus, in what is now Turkey, had a population of about 250,000, and was famous for its philosophers, artists, poets, historians, and rhetoricians as well as the grandeur of its gymnasium, its stadium or racecourse, its great theatre and, above all, for its Temple of Artemis.

Gospel writers

It was probably in or near this sprawling and argumentative city that John's gospel was written somewhere between 80 and 110 AD. It was penned by a member of what later became known as the Johannine community and, later still, added to by someone whom scholars call the redactor or editor, also a member of the community.

One man—never named—an insignificant figure during the ministry of Jesus, came to be known as the Beloved Disciple (Jn.19:26 and 21:7), and he may well have been the community's founding figure. He could be the source of much of the material in the fourth gospel that is quite different from what we find in the other three.

A mixed group

The Johannine community was formed in or near Palestine sometime in the 70s or 80s, moving on later to preach to those of a Greek cultural background

in the areas around the city of Ephesus. The community was made up of Jews, including some followers of John the Baptist, and Gentiles, who accepted Jesus as the Messiah. Some Jews, opposed to the Temple authorities, also joined the community, and this group made converts from among the people of Samaria.

Jews regarded the Samaritans as a group of spurious worshippers of the God of Israel and they were detested even more than pagans. The origins of the distrust lie deep in early Israelite history but there was no deeper breach of human relations in the contemporary world than the feud between Jews and Samaritans. The breadth and depth of Jesus' teaching on love would demand no greater act of a Jew than to accept a Samaritan as a brother or sister.

Jewish hostility

The fact that many Gentiles and Samaritans were accepted into the community and intermingled with Jewish Christians who still frequented the synagogue, may have contributed to Jewish hostility to the community. For a time at least, some synagogues may have accepted Jewish believers in Jesus in their midst.

However, when the Johannine Christians spoke of Jesus in terms of his pre-existence with the Father and as the incarnate Word of God who revealed the Father to humanity (Jn. 1:1-2), there were fierce debates with those Jews who thought that the followers of Jesus were abandoning the Jewish belief in the one, true God by making Jesus a second God (Jn.5:18).

In the end, the Jewish leaders had the Johannine Christians expelled from the synagogue (Jn.9:22). The invective against 'the Jews', that runs through John's gospel, arose out of this conflict situation.

It is important to remember, as many later Christians did not, that 'the Jews' referred to here were not Jews in general but rather those leaders who expelled the early Christians from the synagogue or Jews who were extremely hostile to the Johannine community. Anti-Semitism does a profound disservice to the memory of Jesus, himself a believing and practicing Jew.

Process of separation

Because of the hostility of some local synagogue leaders and the persecution Christians often encountered, Johannine Christians saw parallels between what was happening to them and what had happened to Jesus. Gradually from the 50s until perhaps 125-150, a process of separation continued until finally, Christians and Jews saw themselves as belonging to different religions.

John's gospel tends to lay such heavy stress on Christ's divinity that at times it seems to underplay his humanity. (The First Epistle of John tries to correct this over-emphasis.) This provoked deep divisions, even within the community itself. Some people left and finally the community split with some members linking themselves to the broader Christian community while others joined groups that held that Jesus was not truly human or that the world was so distorted that it was not God's creation.

Context of scripture

John's gospel was addressed not to 'the Jews' or to those Gentiles who refused evangelization, whom John refers to as 'the world', but primarily to members of his own community in order to strengthen their faith, partly shaped as it was by the hostility of the synagogue leaders and those who denied the divinity of Christ. The author of John's gospel tells us that his account was written so that 'you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing this you may have life through his name' (Jn.20:31).

In reading the gospel, one has to remember that John was writing after a period of fifty or sixty years of community reflection on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and so the words he puts in Jesus' mouth are interspersed with reflections that may not be the actual words that Jesus used during his ministry but rather theological elaborations on what he had said.

This accounts for the difference we find between how Jesus speaks in the other gospels and in John's gospel. Gospel writers always had to translate Jesus'

words and deeds from that of a village culture to a wider and more sophisticated Greekspeaking culture, and this goes further in John than in the synoptic gospels.

Levels of meaning

Just as in the other gospels, Jesus speaks in parables that are often misunderstood, so in John's gospel, Jesus uses language that seems obvious on one level but always has a deeper, more significant meaning. A good example of this is to be found in the scene where Nicodemus visits Jesus. Jesus speaks of the necessity of being 'born from above'. Nicodemus thinks he is speaking about entering the womb for a second time! This misunderstanding then allows Jesus to speak about what it means to be 'born of the Spirit'.

In John's gospel such misunderstandings of what Jesus means are frequent. The author uses these to provide Jesus with the occasion to explain what he means more fully and to engage his audience and us in the unfolding drama. John's gospel uses this technique over and over again.

Drama

John's gospel is rather like a full-length drama, with its own prologue and various well-developed scenes and characters. Jesus is centre stage as John tries to draw us into a relationship with Jesus. Are you a disciple? Do you love him? Do you have life from him? These are the important questions for John, as indeed they are for us.

This article first appeared in the Messenger (July 2004), a publication of the Irish Jesuits. Credit: The Sacred Heart Messenger.

BIBLICAL SEXUALITY AND GENDER:

Renewing Christian Witness to the Gospel

The Rev. Jay Emerson Johnson, PhD
Pacific School of Religion
The Graduate Theological Union ©2011

How do Christians proclaim the love of God in Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit today? As in every generation, that broad question needs to be contextualized and addressed in relation to key cultural, political, and economic issues. For more than fifty years, Christian communities have struggled in various ways with their proclamation of the gospel in relation to “homosexuality,” or the lives of those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT).

That struggle has divided many Christian communities, ostracized countless individuals, and weakened Christian witness to the gospel. The Bible has been and continues to be the most frequently cited reason why people either condemn or refuse to accept gay and lesbian people, and more recently also bisexual and transgender people.

Biblical scholarship on these questions over the last fifty years has helped many Christian communities to welcome LGBT people and many LGBT people have likewise found new ways to integrate their sexuality and gender expression with their Christian faith. The following is a review of just some of that biblical scholarship and the role it can play in Christian theological reflection, especially for the sake of bearing witness to the good news of Christian faith today.

It is important to realize, first of all, that biblical writers devoted very little energy and attention to same-sex desire or relationships. There are only five passages in the Bible that are most often quoted and which appear to have any direct relation to this topic:

- ▼ Genesis 19:1-13
- ▼ Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13

- ▼ Romans 1:26-27
- ▼ 1 Corinthians 6:9-10
- ▼ 1 Timothy 1:8-11

Two other passages are sometimes mentioned as well:

- ▼ Genesis 1 and 2
- ▼ Jude 6-7

Like every other biblical passage, each of those seven texts deserves careful attention by keeping in mind these three elements of responsible and faithful reading:

- ▼ Biblical texts never speak for themselves; they always need interpretation. Indeed, texts don’t speak at all. But people do speak, and people of faith often speak with biblical texts. How people speak with biblical texts is informed to a large degree by their cultural contexts and social histories.¹
- ▼ Translating ancient languages into contemporary languages always involves interpretation; many words and concepts in both ancient Hebrew and Greek have no direct equivalents in modern languages and translators often disagree about how to translate difficult words and phrases.²
- ▼ Excerpting small sections or even single verses from larger narratives and arguments will always distort the biblical writer’s message. *Everyone* does this from time to time, and it is not necessarily “bad” or “wrong” to do so. But this also means that everyone needs to take responsibility for how and why a given passage is quoted and for what purpose.³

In addition to those guidelines for reading biblical texts responsibly, passages

¹ Asking what the Bible “says” about a given topic reflects this metaphorical assumption that a text can “speak.” For the problems associated with this metaphor, see Dale B. Martin, “The Myth of Textual Agency,” in *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 1-16.

² Among the many sources for the challenges in translating ancient languages as well as interpreting across cultural contexts, see the collection of essays edited by Joel B. Green, *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010).

³ See Martin, “Community-Shaped Scripture,” in *Sex and the Single Savior*, 149-160

that deal with human sexuality and gender deserve additional notes of caution:

- ▼ The word “homosexual” was invented in the nineteenth century and appears nowhere in the original Hebrew or Greek versions of the Bible. German sexologists invented the term “homosexuality” to describe their view of a particular “sexual orientation” or identity that they believed was evident among some human beings. This concept would have been completely foreign to biblical writers.
- ▼ In the ancient cultural contexts of the biblical writers, appropriate sexual relations had very little to do with gender and much more to do with the social status and power of one’s sexual partner. Socially acceptable sexual relations were always understood as involving a socially dominant partner with a socially submissive partner. Men were by definition socially dominant. Many others were considered socially submissive: women, slaves (of either gender), lower economic classes (of either gender), and youth (of either gender). The modern notion of “peer marriage” or a union of “equals” would have been entirely unknown in ancient Mediterranean cultures.⁴
- ▼ Contemporary scientific and biological understandings of sexuality, procreation, and gender were completely unknown in the ancient world. Those who today identify as “bisexual” or “transgender” present additional insights into these questions, which need further attention in both scholarly and church settings.⁵

⁴ Stephen D. Moore describes this ancient world view a bit more severely by noting that absolute inequality was intrinsic to both good worship and good sex. In that context, sex is basically “eroticized inequality” (*God’s Beauty Parlor and Other Queer Spaces in and Around the Bible* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001]), 153.

⁵ Both sociologists and biologists are urging a much broader view today of what constitutes gender in relation to sex. The supposition, for example, that any species, including humanity, can be neatly and strictly divided between male and female derives mostly from modern cultural assumptions. See: Christine Gudorf, “A New Moral Discourse on Sexuality,” in *Human Sexuality and the Catholic Tradition*, ed. Kieran Scott and Harold Daly Horell (New York: Roman and Littlefield Publishers, 2007), 51-69; and Joan Roughgarden, *Evolution’s Rainbow: Diversity, Gender, and Sexuality in Nature and People* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 2004), 5-6. For a good introduction to Roughgarden’s work and perspectives, see the interview with her, “Nature Abhors a Category,” in *The Gay and Lesbian Review*, 15 (January-February 2008), 14-16.

Keeping all those guidelines and notes of caution in view, the following is just one way to read a few of the more difficult biblical passages regarding sexuality (the texts themselves are provided in the first appendix), and especially through the broader lens of the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Rather than merely “refuting” problematic biblical texts, Christian faith communities today, as in every generation, rightly seek insights from the Bible for their gospel mission in the world. Discerning carefully how to read the Bible regarding sexuality and gender thus remains critically important for every Christian congregation. (The second appendix provides a short list of references for further reading and study.)

The Creation Accounts: Genesis 1 and 2

In Genesis 1:31 God declares that the creation, and especially humanity, is “very good.” Yet the goodness of human sexuality and gender continues to raise a number of difficult questions. Genesis 1 and 2 are sometimes cited, for example, to support two interrelated convictions: first, “gender complementarity” describes God’s creation of human beings as male and female; and second, such complementarity is best expressed in the procreation of children within monogamous marriage. The extensive biblical scholarship available on these passages—in both Jewish and Christians traditions—nuances those two convictions in some important ways.

In the first of the two creation accounts in Genesis (1:26-27) distinct gender differentiation is attributed to the whole human species rather than to individuals, just as both male and female alike apply to God, in whose image humanity is made.⁶ Similarly, the command to “be fruitful and multiply” (1:28) is given to the human species, not to each individual. If this were not the case, this text would lead to some rather troubling if not actually absurd conclusions. For example, we might need to “view those who are single, celibate, or who for

⁶ This text raises a host of questions which the text itself does not address concerning gender and sexuality in both humanity and God. See Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, *People of the Body: Jews and Judaism from an Embodied Perspective* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992).

whatever reason do not have children—including Jesus of Nazareth—as being disobedient sinners.”⁷ Moreover, the generative aspects of loving and faithful commitment can be seen in many different ways and not only in bearing and raising children.⁸

The second account in Genesis provides specific reference to the creation of distinct individuals (2:7-22), and, for the first time, something that is *not* good in God’s creation. “It is not good,” God declares, “for the human being to be alone.”⁹ Here the story turns on the importance of companionship and not, as in the first account, on the procreation of children. Significantly, the companion God provides for the solitary human is not defined by “otherness” but by suitable similarity. In this passage, “there is no emphasis...on ‘difference’ or ‘complementarity’ at all—in fact, just the opposite. When Adam sees Eve, he does not celebrate her otherness but her sameness: what strikes him is that she is ‘bone of my bones, flesh of my flesh.’” Reducing this story to the fitness of particular anatomical parts, as some have done, misses the poignancy of this story: “God sees the plight of this first human being and steps in and does whatever it takes to provide him with a life-giving, life-sustaining companion.”¹⁰ Moreover, neither of these two chapters in Genesis refers explicitly to marriage. The purpose of these creation accounts, rather, is to affirm God as the creator of all things and “the priority of human companionship.”¹¹

Genesis 1 and 2 can and should continue to shape, inform, and energize the Church’s faithful witness to the God revealed in Scripture. The Church can, for example, proclaim God as the creator and affirm the goodness of God’s creation, which includes the dignity of every human being as created in God’s image. This affirmation remains vital, not least for the sake of embracing the

⁷ William Stacy Johnson, *A Time to Embrace: Same-Gender Relationships in Religion, Law, and Politics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006), 115-16.

⁸ See Paul Marshall, *Same-Sex Unions: Stories and Rites* (New York: Church Publishing, 2004) 38-39.

⁹ Genesis 2:18 (for the significance of this translation of the verse, see Johnson, *A Time to Embrace*, 114-115, 117).

¹⁰ Johnson, *A Time to Embrace*, 120.

¹¹ Johnson, *A Time to Embrace*, 112.

full humanity of women. The unqualified dignity with which the biblical writer treated both men and women in the account of their creation stands out as quite remarkable in the patriarchal culture in which it was written.¹²

St. Paul, furthermore, would urge Christians to read the Genesis accounts of creation through the lens of the new creation, which God has promised in Christ, the first fruits of which God has provided by raising Christ from the dead (1 Corinthians 15:20-25). Living into that promise and anticipating its fulfillment, Paul urged the Christians in Galatia to understand their baptism into Christ’s death and resurrection as erasing the social and cultural hierarchies with which they were most familiar: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28).¹³

The Destruction of Sodom: Genesis 19:1-13

Many biblical texts in both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures rely on the significance of hospitality, which should be understood well beyond its relegation in western society to proper manners. Scripture regards hospitality, toward both friend and stranger, as evidence of covenantal obedience and fruitfulness.¹⁴ A particularly dramatic biblical reminder of the importance of hospitable relations

¹² Johnson notes, for example, that in ancient Mediterranean society, women were considered human beings but decidedly deficient ones and were therefore rightly subservient to men (*A Time to Embrace*, 275, n.16). Dale Martin likewise relates this ancient view of the inferiority of women—as “deficient men”—to the difficulties in translating, let alone interpreting, two Greek words in the New Testament that have been frequently cited regarding “homosexuality.” Those words appear in 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10. The words “sodomite” or “homosexual” have appeared in some English translations of those verses, but the meaning of the Greek in both cases is obscure and elusive. Martin believes it likely that these words referred to cultural practices involving sexual exploitation (perhaps including rape) and also effeminate behavior, which for men in that society triggered both alarm and disgust (“*Arsenokoites and Malakos*: Meanings and Consequences,” in *Biblical Ethics and Homosexuality: Listening to Scripture*, ed. Robert L. Brawley [Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996]).

¹³ See Martin, “The Queer History of Galatians 3:28: ‘No Male and Female,’” in *Sex and the Single Savior*, 77-90.

¹⁴ Exodus 22:21, Leviticus 19:34, Deuteronomy 24:19-21, Malachi 3:5, and Hebrews 13:2, among many others. For an overview and analysis of the centrality of hospitality in Scripture and in early Christianity, see Amos Yong, *Hospitality and the Other: Pentecost, Christian Practices, and the Neighbor* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2008).

has also been frequently cited to oppose gay and lesbian relationships: the story of Sodom's destruction in Genesis 19. Popular interpretations of this passage, however, rely less on the biblical story itself than on the cultural reception of this story over many centuries of European history.¹⁵

The narrative in this passage turns on whether certain visitors to Sodom will be received graciously and hospitably by the city's inhabitants or exploited and even raped. The sin of Sodom's citizens thus refers explicitly to the codes of hospitality in the ancient near east rather than to same-gender sexual relations.¹⁶ Other biblical writers who referred to Sodom never highlighted sexuality or even mentioned it at all. Ezekiel, for example, was quite direct in his interpretation of the story: "This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy" (16:49).¹⁷ Jesus likewise evoked the story of Sodom, not for the purpose of sexual ethics but in the context of sending out his disciples to do the work of ministry. Those who did not receive his disciples, he said, would suffer a fate worse than the citizens of Sodom (Matthew 10:15), which underscores the centrality of hospitality in that ancient story.

As early as the 1950s, biblical scholars attempted to place Genesis 19 in its original cultural context and to revive an interpretive approach to that story

¹⁵ The term "sodomy," for example, does not appear in Scripture, and what it has come to mean (including within North Atlantic jurisprudence) is not supported by the biblical references to it. See: Jay Emerson Johnson, "Sodomy and Gendered Love: Reading Genesis 19 in the Anglican Communion," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Reception History of the Bible*, ed., Michael Lieb, Emma Mason, and Jonathan Roberts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 415-434; and Michael Carden, *Sodomy: A History of a Christian Biblical Myth* (London: Equinox Publishing, 2009).

¹⁶ The definition of "sodomy" varied rather widely throughout Christian history and coalesced exclusively around particular sexual acts only in the eleventh century; see Mark D. Jordan, *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997).

¹⁷ Ezekiel's description represents the approach most often taken by writers in the Hebrew Bible in which the sin of Sodom is always in association with violence or injustice; see Daniel Helminiak, *What the Bible Really Says about Homosexuality*, rev. ed., (Tajique, NM: Alamo Square Press, 2000), 47-49. In the New Testament, Jude 7 is sometimes cited as well, yet that verse does not describe "sexual immorality" with any precision (it could refer to rape, for example) and the "unnatural lust" of Sodom's inhabitants could also refer to the fact that the strangers sent to Sodom were actually angels (see Genesis 6:4).

that resonated with the intra-biblical witness to it.¹⁸ Scripture, in other words, would have us read Genesis 19 as applicable to all people rather than only to some, and the lesson for all is the primacy of hospitality, or the love of neighbor, as Jesus himself commanded.

"Abominations": Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13

Ancient Hebrew is often more difficult to translate than ancient Greek. For both, the work of translation is always already a work of interpretation, which involves appreciating the significant social differences between ancient Israelite culture, first century Greco-Roman culture, and twenty-first century western culture. Biblical texts were written in and for those particular communities with shared concerns and perspectives about their lives in relationship to God.

Noting the significant cultural differences between the households of ancient Israel and today's western nuclear families can, for example, inform our interpretation of another biblical passage that has been cited to reject "homosexuality": Leviticus 18:22, and its analogue, 20:13.

These two verses belong to an extensive array of dietary restrictions, commandments, and ritual practices often referred to as the "Levitical holiness code." Two features of ancient Israelite society can provide important assistance in interpreting these difficult passages: the process of constructing a religious identity for Israel distinct from its surrounding cultures; and the strict gender hierarchy of the ancient Mediterranean world.¹⁹

Leviticus 18:22 condemns sex between men, and more particularly, treating a man like a woman. The Hebrew word used for this condemnation, translated as "abomination," appears most often with reference to the cultic practices

¹⁸ One of the earliest examples of this approach was Derrick Sherwin Bailey, *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition* (London: Longmans, Green, 1955).

¹⁹ Insights from Jewish commentators and scholars on these and other important aspects of biblical interpretation deserve renewed attention in Christian communities. See for example: Steven Greenberg, *Wrestling with God and Men: Homosexuality in Jewish Tradition* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2005); and Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1995).

associated with the worship of foreign gods. Similar condemnations of child sacrifice and bestiality in this same chapter strengthen the connection to idolatrous rituals.²⁰ An “abomination,” then, could refer to any practice taken from Israel’s surrounding cultures and which diluted or distorted Israel’s unique religious and cultural identity.²¹

Equally important, the patriarchal ordering of that ancient society relied on male privilege. Sexual practices reflected this gendered ordering as men were expected to assume an active role and women a passive one, which both reflected and perpetuated the dominance of men in all other spheres of cultural and religious life and reinforced the treatment of women as property. More bluntly, sex in the ancient world was always understood with reference to penetration: one partner penetrates (the socially dominant one) and the other is penetrated (the socially inferior one). Sexual relations in those ancient cultural contexts, in other words, were defined by who rightly had power over whom. Sex between men in that worldview would thus violate male privilege and disrupt the patriarchal ordering of society.²²

In these and other ways, ancient Israelite culture, which the Levitical holiness code was meant to uphold, differs significantly from the egalitarian ideals toward which many Christian families strive in modern western culture (and indeed in other locales as well).²³ Likewise, the distinctive concerns shared by the

²⁰ See Martti Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World: A Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 37-56. St. Paul would likely have known the connection between the Levitical holiness code and idolatrous cults as well, which lends further support to interpreting the first chapter of Romans with reference to temple prostitution (see the section below on Romans).

²¹ Some scholars contest these connections between the Holiness Code and “pagan” cultic practices. Saul Olyan, for example, finds those connections weak and stresses instead notions of “boundary violations” and concerns over the land’s “purity” in male sexual acts that “feminize” a male sexual partner (“‘And with a Male You Shall Not Lie the Lying Down of a Woman’: On the Meaning and Significance of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 5 (1994), 179-206).

²² Jack Rogers, *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church*, Revised ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 68-69.

²³ The treatment not only of women but also of children as property, as well as the practice of concubinage and slave-holding in ancient Mediterranean households marks these differences even further. See: Carol L. Meyers, “Everyday Life: Women in the Period of the Hebrew Bible,

ancient Israelites (and the Apostle Paul as well; see the next section) to reject the sexual practices associated with idolatrous cults are in no way applicable to the lives of faithful Christians who also identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender.

These historical and cultural differences, however, do not render these biblical passages irrelevant. To the contrary, Scripture continues to bear witness to the primacy of covenantal relationship with the one true God of Israel, whom Christians believe and proclaim is revealed decisively in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Rather than shaping our lives and households based on ancient cultural patterns, the challenge in each new generation is instead to discern how that covenantal relationship with God informs all of our relationships today.

“Unnatural” Relations and Idolatry: Romans 1:26-27

The Apostle Paul had a number of opinions and perspectives about human sexuality that may seem a bit peculiar to the modern reader. He recommended to the Christians in Corinth, for example, that the work of Christian ministry is best done by remaining unmarried (1 Corinthians 7:25-32). But for gay and lesbian people, the first chapter of his letter to the Romans (especially 1:26-27) has played a significant role in the Church’s debates over sexuality.

Several important issues arise when interpreting this Pauline passage, including the difficulties in knowing what Paul meant by “unnatural” in those verses, to whom he was addressing these concerns, and the rhetorical purpose of his letter overall.²⁴ It is particularly important to note, however, that Paul’s description of

in *The Women’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Sharon H., and Sharon H. Ringe, Expanded ed. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1998), 250-59; Gale A. Yee, *Poor Banished Children of Eve: Woman As Evil in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2003), 29-58; and Amy L. Wordelman, “Everyday Life: Women in the Period of the New Testament,” in *The Women’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Sharon H., and Sharon H. Ringe, Expanded ed. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1998), 482-88.

²⁴ See L. William Countryman, *Dirt, Greed, and Sex: Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and Their Implications for Today*, Revised ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 119-123. See also Martin, “Heterosexism and the Interpretation of Romans 1:18-32,” in *Sex and the Single Savior*, 51-64.

sexual behavior in the first chapter appears in direct relation to his condemnation of idolatry. For Paul, the consequence (not the cause) of worshipping false gods is a distorted understanding of sexuality, its purpose and goal (1:22-23).

The Greco-Roman world of the first century exhibited many different kinds of sexual relationships and practices (just as the world does today). It's not at all clear precisely which kind of sexual practices Paul had in mind in this passage, though he is clearly troubled by them. Since Paul was writing to Christians in Rome, some have suggested that he was concerned particularly with the religious cults devoted to fertility gods and goddesses. Some have claimed that these cultic rituals may have included self-castration, drunken orgies, and having sex with young temple prostitutes (both male and female).²⁵ Christians rightly condemn all those behaviors as violations of the human body, which Paul likewise insisted is the very temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:16-17); it is just as important to realize that those alleged cultic practices have nothing to do with LGBT Christians today, about which Paul would not have had any experience or knowledge.²⁶

Some have also noted that the rather unusual phrase Paul uses to describe those sexual practices (*para phusin* in Greek, which could mean "against nature" or "contrary to nature") appears again in this same letter, but there he uses it to refer to God. In chapter 11, Paul describes Gentiles as belonging to a "wild olive tree." God lops them off that tree and, "contrary to nature," grafts them on to the one true tree of Israel (11:24). This should, at the very least, give readers pause as they consider what "unnatural" really means in this letter.²⁷

²⁵ For the controversy over ancient fertility cults and the alleged sexual practices associated with them, see Robert A. Oden, Jr., *The Bible without Theology: The Theological Tradition and Alternatives to It* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), chpt. 5, "Religious Identity and the Sacred Prostitution Accusation," 131-153. For more on the Greco-Roman cultural background of the New Testament and the sensibilities of first century Palestinian Judaism, see Robin Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality: Contextual Background for a Contemporary Debate* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983).

²⁶ See Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World*, 103-113.

²⁷ See Johnson, *A Time to Embrace*, 98-99; and Helminiak, *What the Bible Really Says*, 80-86.

Paul's broader insight about idolatry in the first chapter, however, still compels the Church to continual discernment and assessment of its common life. Contrary to how most people in contemporary western society think about such things, Paul would urge us to make a direct link between faithful worship and proper sexual relations. Our sexual lives, in other words, are intertwined with our relationship with God, and vice versa.

The primacy of our covenantal relationship with God in Christ can shed even further light on Paul's recommendation to the Christians in Corinth that they remain unmarried. "Single" people can play an important role in bearing witness to the good news of the gospel: Human sexual relationships of any kind are not the purpose or goal of human life; union with God in Christ is the goal for all, including the whole created order, as the rest of Paul's letter to the Romans makes clear (8:18-25).

At their best, human relationships can only point us toward our final fulfillment which God has promised in Christ. People who make an intentional decision to remain unmarried, then, offer important signposts on that spiritual journey to which all of us are called and in which nothing, including marriage, should supplant our primary devotion to God and to God's household, the Church.

Conclusion: Abundant Life

Christians have always read the Bible in many different ways over many centuries. Christians have likewise always insisted on finding a living word in these ancient texts for their own day and circumstances. In that work, Christians have frequently turned to the four gospel accounts as their primary guide and inspiration in proclaiming the good news of God's love in Christ and through the power of the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus promised would lead his followers deeper into truth (John 16:13).

The Spirit continues to lead the Church into shared discernment over a wide range of issues that biblical writers could not have anticipated. Paul himself understood this and reminded the Corinthians that our knowledge will always

be incomplete and partial (1 Corinthians 13:9-10). Meanwhile, and just as Paul urged, Christians strive to live with faith, hope, and love, and to bear witness to the greatest of these, which is love (1 Corinthians 13:13).

The Church today can continue in that faithful, hopeful, and loving discernment in a number of ways. Over the last sixty years, for example, social, psychological, and bio-medical sciences have contributed to a gradual cultural shift regarding sexual orientation and gender identity. “Homosexuality” is no longer considered a pathological condition, as it once was in the early twentieth century, and which carried severe social consequences. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people now participate openly in nearly every profession and walk of life. Just like different-gender couples, many LGBT people form stable and enduring relationships and some also raise children in their families.²⁸

This cultural shift in understanding can inform faithful readings of the Bible concerning LGBT people, especially in the light of modern biblical scholarship. Many Christian communities and clergy have come to believe that the truth into which the Spirit is leading them today resembles Peter’s spiritual insight concerning Gentiles: No one, he declared, should be called “profane or unclean” (Acts 10:28).

As the Church embraces that insight, it can extend the reach of God’s radical welcome and extravagant generosity, striving always to follow the One who came that all might have life, “and have it abundantly” (John 10:10).

²⁸ The 2000 U.S. Census showed 22% of gay male couples and 33% of lesbian couples were raising children, which increased in 2010 census data (<http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hh-fam/cps2010.html>; accessed Sept. 1, 2011). Recent studies have shown no discernible difference in the health and well-being of children raised by same-gender couples compared to different-gender couples (<http://www.livescience.com/6073-children-raised-lesbians-fine-studies-show.html>; accessed Sept. 1, 2011).



APPENDIX 1: The Biblical Passages

(The New Revised Standard Version)

Genesis 1:26-27

Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.'

So God created humankind in his image
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

Genesis 2:4b-8; 18-22

In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground—then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed.

Then the Lord God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.' So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said,

'This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
this one shall be called Woman,
for out of Man this one was taken.'

Genesis 19:1-13

The two angels came to Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gateway of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them, and bowed down with his face to the ground. He said, 'Please, my lords, turn aside to your servant's house and spend the night, and wash your feet; then you can rise early and go on your way.' They said, 'No; we will spend the night in the square.' But he urged them strongly; so they turned aside to him and entered his house; and he made them a feast, and baked unleavened bread, and they ate. But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house; and they called to Lot, 'Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, so that we may know them.' Lot went out of the door to the men, shut the door after him, and said, 'I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. Look, I have two daughters who have not known a man; let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please; only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof.' But they replied, 'Stand back!' And they said, 'This fellow came here as an alien, and he would play the judge! Now we will deal worse with you than with them.' Then they pressed hard against the man Lot, and came near the door to break it down. But the men inside reached out their hands and brought Lot into the house with them, and shut the door. And they struck with blindness the men who were at the door of the house, both small and great, so that they were unable to find the door. Then the men said to Lot, 'Have you anyone else here? Sons-in-law, sons, daughters, or anyone you have in the city—bring them out of the place. For we are about to destroy this place, because the outcry against its people has become great before the Lord, and the Lord has sent us to destroy it.'

Leviticus 18:22

You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.

Leviticus 20:13

If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them.

Romans 1:26-27

For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.

1 Corinthians 6:9-10

Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God.

1 Timothy 1:8-11

Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it legitimately. This means understanding that the law is laid down not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their father or mother, for murderers, fornicators, sodomites, slave-traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me.

Jude 6-7

And the angels who did not keep their own position, but left their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains in deepest darkness for the judgment of the great day. Likewise, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which, in the same manner as they, indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural lust, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire.



Appendix 2: For Further Reading and Study

A wide range of biblical and theological scholarship is available from the last fifty years on questions regarding human sexuality and gender. The following is just a small sample of that work, particularly suitable for Christian congregational study.

- Robert L. Brawley, ed., *Biblical Ethics and Homosexuality: Listening to Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996).
- Michael Carden, *Sodomy: A History of a Christian Biblical Myth* (London: Equinox Publishing, 2009).
- L. William Countryman, *Dirt, Greed, and Sex: Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and Their Implications for Today*, Revised ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007).
- Steven Greenberg, *Wrestling with God and Men: Homosexuality in Jewish Tradition* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2005).
- Daniel Helminiak, *What the Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*, Revised ed. (Tajique, NM: Alamo Square Press, 2000).
- William Stacy Johnson, *A Time to Embrace: Same-Gender Relationships in Religion, Law, and Politics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2006).
- Martti Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World: A Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998).
- Jack Rogers, *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church*, Revised ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009).
- Letha Dawson Scanzoni and Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, *Is the Homosexual My Neighbor? A Positive Christian Response*, Revised ed. (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1994).
- Robin Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality: Contextual Background for a Contemporary Debate* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983).
- Gray Temple, *Gay Unions in Light of Scripture, Tradition, and Reason* (New York: Church Publishing, 2004).
- Walter Wink, ed., *Homosexuality and Christian Faith: Questions of Conscience for the Churches* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999).



CLGS AFRICAN AMERICAN ROUNDTABLE

The CENTER for LESBIAN and GAY STUDIES in RELIGION and MINISTRY
at Pacific School of Religion

1798 Scenic Avenue | Berkeley, CA 94709
510-849-8206 | Toll-free: 800/999-0528 | Fax: 510/849-8212 | Email: clgs@clgs.org

www.clgs.org

